



## **Pathways to Education Program: Advocacy Support**

### **Essential Elements of Pathways to Education**

Pathways to Education is an integrated, community-based program that provides comprehensive supports to students in low income communities with high dropout rates. The Pathways to Education Program was first delivered in 2001 by Toronto's Regent Park community. Recognizing that schools alone cannot address the complex challenges and barriers faced by young people in economically disadvantaged communities, Pathways provides targeted academic, social, financial and advocacy supports for the educational attainment of youth, which is fundamental to health, well-being and prosperity.

The Program reaches out and encourages all youth in the Pathways catchment area, including those least likely to participate in the Program. Support is provided to students throughout their full term in secondary school and beyond and young people are challenged to be responsible and accountable. Students and their parents sign a contract in which they agree to comply with the program requirements related to school attendance and Program participation in exchange for Pathways supports for the duration of student's secondary school enrolment.

Academic and social supports are delivered in large part by volunteers, who are recruited, trained and supervised in delivering after-school tutoring and extra-curricular mentoring activities. Students receive assistance to address financial barriers to school participation, such as for transportation to school or lunch while at school. Students also have financial incentives in the form of a bursary for each year of Program participation to offset the costs of post-secondary education or training.

Pathways to Education works with the school system and rigorously monitors Program implementation and results for continuous improvement. To date, every Pathways Program has improved credit accumulation and reduced absenteeism by participating students. Eighty percent of Pathways graduates from Regent Park have gone on to post-secondary education, compared to 20% of the pre-Pathways cohort, and over 90% of these students are the first in their families to go on to university or college.

Pathways to Education is cost-effective and results in a significant long-term financial pay-back to society. The incremental benefit to society over the lifetime of a Pathways graduate is an estimated \$400,000 due to reduced costs to government and increased tax revenues collected. The Pathways to Education Program is demonstrating that young people from economically disadvantaged communities can do as well as or better than their more privileged peers.

## **OVERVIEW**

Pathways to Education Canada's mission is to work with and provide comprehensive support to low-income communities with high dropout rates, helping them to give every young person a chance to graduate from high school and have access to greater opportunities, including post-secondary education.

The concept of the competent learner is fundamental to the Pathways Program. Assisting students to succeed in school is more than helping them to absorb, understand, and remember the class material. Students also need to develop the skills and the work ethic that will shape them into life-long learners.

Pathways to Education initiates new Programs by first identifying a local organization with a track record in the community and the capacity to lead the Program delivery, establish relationships with school boards and other institutions, recruit and support staff as a team, recruit and retain volunteers, and raise funds. As the Program expands to other communities and adapts and evolves within each new environment, maintaining essential components, consistency and excellence are ongoing challenges. As the program enrolls a growing number of students, explicit benchmarks are used to ensure critical outcomes.

Pathways employs Student-Parent Support Workers (SPSWs) to work with students on every aspect of the Program. The Student-Parent Support Worker is coach, referee and mentor and they have a number of key responsibilities:

- monitor academic placement
- track school attendance
- monitor and encourage participation in tutoring and mentoring activities
- work with other staff to provide and coordinate appropriate supports
- gather information from the school
- support a process of student reflection
- inform students and parents when expectations are not met
- monitor challenges encountered by students
- provide feedback to Program management.

The underlying objective of all these interactions is to determine how best to support the student in achieving goals and credits.

## **STUDENT-PARENT SUPPORT WORKERS**

The Student-Parent Support Worker provides a human link between the student, the school, the family, and the Program. The SPSW's perspective puts the pieces together for the bigger picture. To help students succeed, SPSWs need to develop a strong, positive relationship with each student and the student's parent. SPSWs support the student's progress in school and identify challenges, while empowering students to successfully navigate the school system and seek the resources and supports they need.

It takes time, skill, energy, and patience to develop and maintain relationships with students while monitoring, collecting, and documenting a large amount of participation information from a variety of people and sources. When hiring SPSW staff, the Pathways Program Director looks for a variety of backgrounds in areas such as education, social work, child and youth work, or community development.

An SPSW:

- meets each student at Orientation before school begins
- helps students prepare for the first few weeks of school
- schedules bi-monthly meetings (or more often if needed)
- checks in with each student to ask how things are going in general, at school and at tutoring and mentoring
- monitors participation in alternative tutoring and alternative group mentoring
- studies attendance records
- provides information regarding community resources and events
- organizes the distribution of current financial supports
- offers one-on-one counselling in the event of possible suspension
- participates in case conferences
- visits tutoring and mentoring activities

Students are organized in clusters by school and assigned to an SPSW, in a ratio of approximately 50:1. Once six full-time SPSW positions are filled at a site, the position of SPSW Coordinator/Team Leader is created to supervise the SPSWs.

### **SPSWs WORKING WITH THE SCHOOLS**

Elementary schools, high schools and their school boards, and post-secondary institutions are all essential partners in the delivery of successful Pathways to Education Programs. Feeder or elementary schools are necessary to register Grade 8 students and to identify those with special needs. High schools and their school boards provide access to and information on students, office space for biweekly student-SPSW meetings, teaching and guidance staff for struggling students, and baseline and annual data on attendance and credits earned. A “Consent to Release Form” gives Pathways the legal permission to access participating students’ school records and to exchange information within Pathways, with the school and with a student’s parent(s).

Post-secondary institutions work with Pathways on enrolment of the Pathways graduates in post-secondary education, transition support, financial subsidies, and a range of other student supports.

Each year, SPSWs contact feeder schools about student identification and recruitment and processes for distributing information about the Program and for conducting registration. SWSWs register new students and inform parents and students about their rights and responsibilities.

SPSWs are regularly connected with key high school personnel and acquainted with school policies, culture and curricula. SPSWs usually give a presentation to entire school staff teams in the first semester to familiarize them with the Program and the support required. Relationships are usually developed in each school with the principal, vice-principals, student services staff, office administration staff, and at least one contact person who will be the ‘champion’ or main supporter of the Pathways Program.

For SPSWs, school staff are the ‘gatekeepers’ and allies, making accommodation so that the SPSW can meet with their students within the schools, regularly available to provide student attendance information, and giving their time for student consultations. SPSWs make arrangement with each school for teachers to provide feedback and relevant academic information to the SPSW, for administration to connect with them, and for information such as exam timetables to be shared. Key relationships are also developed with the hall monitors and school resource officers about school attendance and potential suspensions.

High school teachers are asked for a range of information that can include information on student attendance and punctuality, class preparation level, quality of assignments submitted, attitude and behaviour, ability to concentrate, capacity to work independently, level of homework submission and completion, and areas that need improvement.

SPSWs often meet with teachers about specific students and get advice about students who are struggling. They work with students on programming contracts and time management strategies with advice from the teachers. High school teachers provide positive feedback about the Program in general and about the role of the SPSW in particular.

Strategies that have worked well for SPSWs across communities are those that facilitate coordinated work with the Program and with the schools to address the needs of struggling students. These include student specific logs for those who need more attention and follow-up, case conferences to make sure everyone is “on the same page”, supplementary resources from the schools, and information from teachers upon which students should be focusing.

## **SPSWs AND PARENTS**

Experience shows that parent involvement is an extremely important factor in student success. There are many avenues for parents to give input, such as sitting on an advisory committee, participating in focus groups, or simply speaking with staff. SPSWs try to check in once a month with parents or more often if necessary.

SPSWs for the most part work collaboratively with the students’ parents. Parents call them if they have specific concerns about their children, with regards to challenges they are having at school or in the community. They sit down with parents and the students to talk about any concerns and together arrive at a resolution. SPSWs work to keep parents connected with the Program and the schools and advocate on behalf of the parent or student as is necessary. They participate in meetings at the schools with parents and empower them to advocate for themselves at those meetings.

SPSWs communicate with parents, explaining how the Program works and its value for all students, not just for those who are struggling. Language can often be a barrier and some parents are unable to read in their own language. SPSWs help parents to understand mainstream Canadian society and the education system and integrate teacher feedback in their communications with them. SPSWs typically send a letter home to parents and students at mid-term indicating the student's participation in tutoring, mentoring, school attendance and meetings with their SPSWs.

“This has been so positive for my son. We moved to Canada in 2008 from the Congo and I was worried about how he would integrate but with help from Pathways he has integrated very well--his social relationships, doing well in school, doing his homework, and his music.”  
--Parent, Ottawa Pathways Program

### **SPSWs AND STUDENT VALIDATION**

An overriding principle of Pathways to Education is the concept of validation: that Pathways students belong and can be successful. SPSWs are there as advocates for students who often have long been stigmatized, to help them realize high expectations. SPSWs mentor the students by promoting interactions on an individual basis.

“We have to get students to a place where they can self advocate.”  
--SPSW coordinator, Regent Park

Students are regularly polled about their satisfaction with various elements of the program, asked for suggested improvements, and invited to express what they like, don't like and how participating in the program makes them feel. Most indicate high levels of satisfaction, especially with their SPSW, and agree that the Program helps them achieve, try new things and feel proud of their community.

### **CONCLUSION**

SPSWs enhance students' social capital through relationships with committed adults, advocacy, and the maintenance of a positive environment where academic achievement is the norm. Feedback collected from SPSWs at the various sites indicates that a positive and collaborative work environment results from Pathways' commitment to continuous evaluation and improvement. This commitment to program excellence is also reflected in the supports provided to the students by SPSWs, helping them to succeed in school and beyond and to fulfil their individual potential.